

“Teaching Writing Transition from the High School to the College Classroom: Accounting for Prior Learning, Self-Placement, and State Testing or Shifting Blame?”

Patricia Pytleski Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, English

Director of the University Writing Center

Kutztown University

Kutztown, Pennsylvania, USA.

Two significant issues exist when students transition from high school to college writing: meeting the varied needs and ability levels of students and dealing with a college writing curriculum that is vastly different and oftentimes in opposition to their high school writing experiences.

Students come to college with high school writing experience; some have written abundantly, and some have little writing experience. Two significant issues exist when enrolling students in required composition courses: 1. having students take the appropriate course based on their ability levels and past writing experiences and 2. teaching college composition seemingly in opposition to the writing educations they have already received. The transition from high school to college writing is an important matter that warrants the attention of students, high school faculty, and college faculty.

It would be ideal for the curriculum and instruction in high school to align itself to the writing valued in First Year College writing courses. Yet often, this is not the case; a conflict exists, and students encounter this conflict during their first semesters at college. Perhaps this issue can be addressed prior to students taking their first college composition course. Once in class, students sometimes find that the instructor's pedagogy differs greatly from that of their high school teachers, even if the level matches that of the students well. Oftentimes, college composition instructors “unlearn” prior writing instruction (i.e. the 5 paragraph essay), and this shift in writing can confuse or frustrate students. Why should they abandon/ question previous writing instruction? At times, blame is placed on the high school teachers for not teaching writing “the correct way.” Thus, when students attend the composition course best for them, are they able to focus on the writing agency they now have, or do they see the shift as a form of blame on their past or current educators for wasting their time?

In an attempt to handle this conflict and ensure that these required course are beneficial to students, and not merely to fill their course grid/ requirement, some colleges place students into various levels of composition based on varying factors: SAT scores, prior grades, and AP exam results, but seldom on their past writing experiences. Some colleges require two semesters of composition, yet my university, Kutztown University in Kutztown, Pennsylvania, only requires one. In an attempt to make the composition course choice as beneficial as possible for students, Kutztown University has involved students in this placement decision and created Directed Self-Placement (DSP), a summer orientation program to help students choose an appropriate level of college composition.

According to Edward White in *Directed Self-Placement: Principles and Practices*, “Directed Self-Placement argues that

in place of testing students, the institution puts its efforts into informing students about the demands and expectations of the composition courses available to them and how they can meet the writing requirement. The students make informed choices, and take full responsibility of their choices, instead of more or less grudgingly accepting test results and institutional placements. (White vii)

During the Summer 1999 orientation for new students (Chernekoff 127), Kutztown University offered an “initial trial implementation of DSP.” The implementation of DSP varies from school to school; “Kutztown University... asks students to detail their specific reading and writing experiences over the past 1 or 2 years” (Royer and Gilles 2). The success of the program has allowed it to continue through the present. According to Janice Chernekoff, the English Department faculty member responsible for its initial inception, DSP “suits our needs in a number of ways.

Philosophically, DSP dovetails nicely with the emphasis on student responsibility and decision making in our orientation program. Practically, it creates only a minimal staffing, financial, and time burden for the university as well as the orientation program organizers” (127). Additionally, “DSP has created the need for our department to talk about its goals and pedagogies related to composition...[and] has been the catalyst that has made it necessary for us to re-examine what we all do in composition, what we should be doing, and why and how” (Chernekoff 128).

At Kutztown University, each summer during student orientation, the English Department’s Composition Coordinator meets with incoming freshman in groups to aid and direct students to successfully self-place themselves in a composition course. According to the current coordinator, Dr. Amy Lynch Biniek, Kutztown’s adoption of DSP

was part of an initiative to improve F[irst] Y[ear] C[omposition] overall. This included getting rid of the [developmental English] DEV/ENG, the zero credit composition course, and instituting 022 and 023, both college-level and for credit, in a stretch model. Students had been placed according to standardized test scores, and DSP represented, in part, an acknowledgement of research in composition showing that standardized test scores do not reveal much about students’ ability or needs in regard to college-level writing. Moreover, DSP was seen as a means of giving students more choice and control over their educations. They aren’t left to make an uneducated guess, however. The ‘directed’ part of the placement system aims to allow for informed choices. (Lynch-Biniek, email)

Professor Lynch Biniek meets with all students who attend a summer session of Connections, our freshman orientation program. In January, [she] also meets one group of in-coming freshmen who will begin matriculating in the Spring semester. [She] see[s] them in large groups of 100 to 200 ... give[s] a presentation, answer[s] questions, administer[s] a self-evaluation tool, and make[s] recommendations. The survey questions ask about students’ reading and writing habits, interests, and experiences; for example, it asks students to consider if they read books regularly, consider themselves to be good writers, have written multiple essays, and have experienced writing as a process (Chernekoff 138). Based on their responses, discussions, and their new knowledge of the requirements and what each course has to offer, students then make their choices about which First Year Writing (FYW) course would benefit them the most, English 022 or 023.

According to Kutztown University’s official course description, English 022 is

an introductory writing course designed to increase students’ writing proficiency and prepare them for the work of ENG 023. [It] focuses on the writing process and provides an introduction to critical thinking and analytical writing... Particular attention is paid to topic generation, focus, purpose and development. In addition, mechanics of Standard Edited American English, which may include diction, grammar, syntax, usage, and structure, are addressed as part of the process of writing. (English 022 Course Description)

Similarly, English 023 is described as being

a sustained examination of and practice with college-level writing...The course focuses on the writing process and provides sustained practice in critical thinking, reading, and writing demanded by academic, public, and professional writing... Particular attention is paid to research processes and the conventions of including research in texts. In addition, the mechanics of good writing, which may include diction, grammar, syntax, usage, and structure are addressed as part of the process of writing; however, the focus of this course is not grammar instruction. (English 023 Course Description)

Both courses focus on writing, critical thinking, high order writing issues, analyses, and varied writing genres and mention the grammar and mechanics are sometimes taught but are not the focus of class. Having taught both, I agree they are similar, yet in English 022, I have fewer students (maximum 20 versus 25), conference more often and longer with each writing assignment for each student, and spend more time, in class and out, on high order issues and lower order grammatical issues I see when reading students’ essays. The class is designed to help students become successful writers that can succeed in *required* English 023. The main difference *students see* between the courses is that “ENG 023 (or ENG 025) is a General Education requirement for all students in all majors. In addition, ENG 023 is a prerequisite for all upper-division English department courses” (English 023 Course Description).

When giving students a choice where they know if they take English 022, they will still have to take 023 as a requirement, one would think most would not want to take two classes when they could take one. Yet KU's DSP program works because many students want to do their best and become the best writers they can. Thus, many opt to take 022 first in addition to 023 later. In Spring 2014, there were 12 sections of 022 and 42 sections of 023, totaling 1249 students; 448 of the 1249 students self-selected 022. In Fall 2014, there are 2 sections of 022 and 38 sections of 023, totaling 817 students; thus, 30 out of 817 students took 022 (Buno). Between the two semesters, a total of 2066 students took English 022 or 023; 478 of these 2066 students self-selected to take English 022, a self-selected additional writing course! These students make up 23%; nearly $\frac{1}{4}$ of all students chose to take an additional FYC writing class!

As stated earlier, Kutztown University deliberately got rid of remediation and/or developmental English courses, following the field's shift away from these courses; students should feel good about opting to be extra prepared or be better writers. English 022 is not a class for basic writers and is not remediation. Yet at times, both English 022 and 023 can make FYC writers feel like what Patricia Bizzell calls basic writers if the writing instruction seems completely foreign to them in relation to their high school experiences. She states that basic writers' "problem on entering college is that they face a clash... of discourse forms. The focus here is not mainly on features of language, such as forms of the verb to be, but on features of texts, such as verbal devices used to achieve coherence (295). She states that these writers, which I see as being similar in ways to our FYC students in English 022 or 023, unless their high school writing instruction was similar to college instruction, need to become accustomed to their new community, the academic community (Bizzell 286). "Like any language community, the academic community uses a preferred dialect... in a convention bound discourse... that creates and organizes the community's world view" (Bizzell 297). Students' experiences in college composition courses depend on their high school experiences and familiarity with college writing instruction.

A lot goes into students' decisions about which course to take upon entering college, and the DSP process can help students to be more successful; yet the DSP process cannot measure how students' high school writing experiences will align with or as Bizzell puts it, "clash" (295) with current best practices in FYW courses. It definitely can help students transition from high school to college writing. ENG 022 and 023 both focus on using the writing process, workshopping and conferences, the importance of thesis, purpose, and audience, and the blending of academic and personal discourse depending on the rhetorical situation; they incorporate cultural studies based topics and sometimes even Social Epistemic-based analysis. According to James Berlin in "Poststructuralism, Cultural Studies, and the Composition Classroom: Postmodern Theory in Practice," he discusses the freshman course he has designed and states that it is a "course that combines methods of cultural studies... with the method of social-epistemic rhetoric in a beginning composition class... [to create] the merger of theory and practice" that composition instructors should help students discover. In "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," Berlin argues that

for social epistemic rhetoric, the real is located in a relationship that involves the dialectical interaction of the observer, the discourse community (social group) in which the observer is functioning, and the material conditions of existence... our notions of the observing self, the communities in which the self functions, and the very structures of the material world are social constructions- all specific to a specific time and culture. (488)

Thus, social epistemic takes the discussion of cultural studies to the next level, not only by asking students to analyze society, the world, and its practices, but also how it affects them.

In opposition to this cultural studies/ social epistemic critical thinking/ analyses practiced in college composition, the majority of local high school writing courses focus on writing modes, the five paragraph essay, and preparation for PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment) writing prompts that do not allow for or encourage the use of the writing process. According to its website, "the annual PSSA is a standards-based, criterion-referenced assessment used to measure a student's attainment of the academic standards while also determining the degree to which school programs enable students to attain proficiency of the standards... Every Pennsylvania student in grades 5, 8 and 11 is assessed in writing." In addition to the PSSAs, "the Keystone Exams are end-of-course assessments designed to assess proficiency" ("Keystone Exams"), and students take this in Writing. These exams "are one component of Pennsylvania's new system of high school graduation requirements [and] will help school districts guide students toward meeting state standards.

“The writing Assessment Advisory Committee (WAAC) identified the 3 ‘modes’ or types of writing to be among the most important in school and in life” (Writing Assessment Released Writing Prompts 2); the three modes used are the informational, narrative, and persuasive modes.

Middle and high schools’ focus on having students’ perform well on these tests directs their writing instruction, and this writing instruction does not involve the best practices used in the Composition/ Rhetoric field, like FYC courses often use. Students are given sample writing prompts that ask them to respond to questions like this: “choose what you think would be the best job for you when you become an adult. Explain why this would be the best choice” (Writing Assessment Released Writing Prompts 6). They are asked to produce well-argued detailed writing in a one time allotted sitting, while showing their proficiency in writing, content, grammar, organization, etc. Demonstrating proficiency is a main focus of high school writing because of the forced implementation of these tests and students’ requirement to pass them (and to reflect positively on the school in order for the school to receive funding). In contrast, college classes focus less on just basic proficiency; they focus on critical thinking and engagement with their writing and the world, student agency, and helping their writing to improve for future writing situations while using the writing process.

Whereas I mentioned how many college FYW classes incorporate cultural studies and sometimes Social Epistemic Rhetoric, many high school writing classes differ and follow Current Traditional Rhetoric (CTR) philosophy more so than their college counterparts. This theory dominated the field of writing for decades, until current scholars began to find other writing pedagogies that produced better writers and thinkers. Current Traditional Rhetoric theory focuses on the product, not process of composing; “it is a discretely produced piece of writing, done to order, error free... [with] a strong prescriptive emphasis on good grammar and correct usage” (Connors 210). Whereas FYW encourages students to involve the entire writing process, use of research to strengthen their own arguments and to critically think about topics, oftentimes high school classes focus on the product and assign papers that meet a format and focus less on the students’ arguments. PSSAs focus on the same things, and to high schools, test maker, administrators, and schools the product is of most importance because the success of this product can affect standings and funding. As I’ve shown, high school writing and college writing are extremely different in focus, philosophy, and outcomes, and this difference should be addressed in order to help our student writers.

It’s important to note that, although this analysis focuses on the state of Pennsylvania, many other states within the United States require similar testing as Pennsylvania, so my argument is not isolated to this state alone. For example, in Florida, students take the FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test), and in Virginia, they take the SOL (Standards of Learning) test; in Tennessee, they give the TPAC (Teaching Performance Assessment Consortium) in writing, and in Maryland, schools give the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) tests. Additionally, according to Maryland’s State Department of Education, Maryland is a Governing State in the PARCC, a consortium of 24 states working

together to develop an assessment system aligned to the Common Core State Standards. The new assessments will be anchored in college and career readiness; provide comparability across states; and be able to assess and measure higher-order skills such as critical thinking, communications, and problem solving. (Maryland State Department of Education)

Arkansas, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, and Rhode Island are among these states giving the PARCC tests (“PARCC”). Although the state tests might have different names, all of them contain a writing portion and affect composing instruction for high school students.

In addition to the difficulties and focus shift student writers feel when transitioning for high school to college writing, trained Secondary Education English student teachers are affected as well. All students, regardless of college major, take FYW, yet Kutztown University also requires that its future English teachers take a course entitled “The Teaching of Writing: Theory and Practice” before student teaching; this course helps them learn composition theory and to apply it pedagogically to their future writing teaching careers. The class discusses the history of composition studies, the Bartholomae/ Elbow debate concerning academic versus expressionist writing, process theory, collaboration, grammar instruction, grading/ assessment, and race and gender theory’s relations to writing. I teach this course, and we discuss the best current compositional practices; yet, these student teachers will face the same thing our freshman writers do- that the writing encouraged in high school and in college is not the same. They will face this as new teachers. How do we remedy this situation?

It would be ideal for the instruction of our future writing teachers to line up with the curriculum these students will find in their future teaching placements in middle and high school writing classes. Additionally, it would be great for this curriculum and instruction in high school to align itself to the writing valued in FYW courses. Yet this is not the case; thus a conflict exists, and students encounter this conflict during their first semesters at college, during student teaching, and in their new teaching careers.

What can we, as educators, do to help this conflict of ideas and philosophies? Students should not blame or think negatively against high school teachers for implementing given curriculum or college professors for using established, yet dissimilar, best practices for FYW. College and high school writing teachers should not blame one another either for this opposition of pedagogy; each teach the content and way they are supposed to based on curriculum, best teaching practices, and their job descriptions.

In her essay, "Why College Teachers Should Teach High School Students," Nancy Barnes argues that "we must stop blaming the students and their high schools for the academic difficulties that students who are 'unprepared' present us with" (293). I argue that this preparedness is not insufficient or inadequate always, just that they are taught writing in a very different way, where high stakes means writing within a given time limit and format for a state test. Barnes suggests that college professors should switch places with high school teachers to not "lose" our students (293). She feels it's a mistake for college teachers to "readily attribute students' uneven skills, their lack of academic sophistication or motivation, to the inadequacies of the public schools" (Barnes 294). To solve the problem, she states that some college teachers should teach high school at times to "walk in the high school teachers' shoes" and vice versa, "to allow us to see and perhaps change" (Barnes 295). "College teachers must stop distancing themselves from the intense demands faced by high school teachers [i.e. the PSSAs], and give up the rigid... distinctions that separate our work from theirs... If we don't begin to talk together, it's hard to imagine how college professors will learn to be good teachers for the students who are arriving in our classrooms in increasing numbers (312).

Although I formerly was a high school English teacher, teach FYW, teach a class for future English teachers about teaching writing in the secondary English classroom, and teach Practicum, mentor, observe, and evaluate student teachers teaching in their middle and high school placements, I still do not see that colleges and high schools will agree to Barnes's proposal about switching places to aid students in their transition from high school to college writing.

Too much is on the line for both situations. Rather, I think there are four possibilities we could try to help ease the transition and work together. 1. We should implement a high school course about college writing and what students should expect, added as an addition to their current instruction; the teacher could meet with college instructors and have discussions about course materials. In addition, 2. We should have meetings between high school English teachers and college composition instructors to discuss the differences in philosophy and instruction. I have attended several yearly sessions called, "Faculty Dialogues" that involve such conversations, among many disciplines including and other than English. More of these conversations and meeting should be happening. Also, 3. We should have honest discussions with students during orientation and in FYW classroom about students' former writing instruction that do not blame or look down upon high school writing; these discussions would benefit both students and teachers about the differences in expectations and their reasons behind them. Lastly, 4. We should incorporate and/or continually implement courses like Kutztown University's ENG 022, which would greatly benefit students during this transitional time.

All four of these suggestions could greatly benefit this collision of ideas that exists between the high school and college writing classroom throughout the United States and abroad; we cannot ignore this discussion or continue to blame one another. Neither of these methods helps us educators or our student writers. One part of Barnes's arguments resonates with me in regards to this difficult and conflicting situation. She states, "We are all in this together" (295), and that is true. After all, we all have become educators, regardless of the age of our students, in hopes of being solid teachers dedicated to bettering our students' lives.

References

- Barnes, Nancy. "Why College Teachers Should Teach High School Students." *Curriculum Inquiry* Vol. 29. Issue No 3 (Autumn 1999): pp. 293-313. Print.
- Berlin, James. "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class." *College English* Vo. 50. No5 (Sep. 1988): pp. 477-494. Print.
- Berlin, James. "Poststructuralism, Cultural Studies, and the Composition Classroom: Postmodern Theory in Practice." *Rhetoric Review* Vol. 11. No. 1 (Autumn 1992): pp. 16-33. Print.
- Bizzell, Patricia. "What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College?" *College Composition and Communication* Vol. 37. No. 3 (Oct. 1986): pp. 294-301. Print.
- Buno, Andrea. English Department Secretary. Email Correspondence. 26 September 2014.
- Chernekoff, Janice. "Introducing Directed Self-Placement to Kutztown University." *Directed Self-Placement: Principles and Practices*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press Inc., 2003. Print.
- Connors, Robert J. "Traditional Rhetoric: Thirty Years of Writing with a Purpose." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* Vol. 11. No. 4 (Autumn 1981): pp. 208-221. Print.
- "English 22 Introduction to College Composition" Kutztown University Course Description. 2104. Web. September 28, 2014.
<https://csku.kutztown.edu/pspr/EMPLOYEE/HRMS/c/COMMUNITY_ACCESS.SSS_BROWSE_CATLG.GBL>
- English 23 College Comp I. Kutztown University Course Description. 2104. Web. September 28, 2014.
<https://csku.kutztown.edu/pspr/EMPLOYEE/HRMS/c/COMMUNITY_ACCESS.SSS_BROWSE_CATLG.GBL>
- "Keystone Exams." Pennsylvania Department of Education. 2014. Web. September 30, 2014.
http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/state_assessment_system/20965/keystone_exams/1190529
- Lynch-Binie, Amy. Kutztown University Composition Coordinator. Email Correspondence. 23 September, 2014.
- "Office of Assessment." Florida Department of Education. 2013. Web. October 1, 2014.
<http://www.fldoe.org/asp/>
- "PARCC. States" Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). 2014. Web. October 1, 2014. <<http://www.parconline.org/parcc-states>>
- "Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)." Maryland State Department of Education. 2003. Web. October 1, 2014. <<http://www.msde.maryland.gov/MSDE/programs/parcc/>>
- "Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)." Pennsylvania Department of Education. 2014. Web. September 30, 2014.
<[http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/state_assessment_system/20965/pennsylvania_system_of_school_assessment_\(pssa\)/1190526](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/state_assessment_system/20965/pennsylvania_system_of_school_assessment_(pssa)/1190526)>
- Royer, Daniel and Roger Gilles. "Introduction: FAQ." *Directed Self-Placement: Principles and Practices*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press Inc., 2003. Print.
- "Standards of Learning (SOLs) and Testing." Virginia Department of Education. 2012. Web. October 1, 2014.
<http://www.doe.virginia.gov/testing/achievement_data/>
- White, Edward M. "Foreword." *Directed Self-Placement: Principles and Practices*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press Inc., 2003. Print.
- "Writing Assessment Released Writing Prompts." The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment. 2002. Web. September 29, 2014. <<http://www.chambersburg.k12.pa.us/curric/K-12%20Curriculum%20CD/Language%20Arts/Resources/Writing.Asses.Rel.Writing.Prompts.pdf>>